

ARTISTS

# 'I'M ALWAYS TRYING TO CREATE THE ILLUSION OF CHAOS': RYAN MCGINLEY ON HIS 'WINTER' AND 'FALL' SHOWS AT TEAM GALLERY

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Ryan McGinley, *Peepers*, 2015  
COURTESY TEAM GALLERY

Is there a photographer alive today whose work is more totemic than Ryan McGinley's? The perennially young photographer—he's only 38, and looks about ten years younger than that—has spent the past fifteen years building one of the most influential careers in the history of American photography. A skateboarder from Ramsey, New Jersey, McGinley graduated from Parsons School of Design in 2000 with a degree in graphic design and a self-published book of photos—snapshots of his friends and fellow enfant terribles of the New York nightlife scene, titled *The Kids Are Alright* after The Who song—to his name. Shortly thereafter, in 2003, he became the youngest artist to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney, at the age of 25.

Since then, McGinley has done something of a 180, leaving the urban nightscape and its intoxications in favor of annual summer road trips, during which he pursued a more quixotic new trademark—the youthful nude—set against a seemingly infinite background of American countryside. His latest bodies of work, however—titled “Winter” and “Fall” and split between Team Gallery's New York and Los Angeles locations, respectively—mark his first take on the country's colder, darker, more formidable incarnations. I spoke to McGinley about his career, his legendary friendships, and his favorite Philip Seymour Hoffman movie over the phone, a week after his Team Gallery dinner in New York, when he was in Los Angeles setting up for the West Coast opening.

**ARTnews: You introduced me to your mother at your Team Gallery dinner last week. That made me wonder: what's she like, and what was it like growing up with her, and growing up in general?**

Ryan McGinley: [laughs] She has eight kids—she had seven kids in seven years, and then she had me eleven years later. So, I'm the youngest of eight kids.

**What do your other siblings do?**

None of them are artists. One of them is in the military. One of my sisters is a nurse, and another one of my sisters is a teacher. Another brother is a chemical engineer.

**Growing up, did you feel like you were different than them?**

No, I always felt supported. Nobody ever told me that [being an artist] was an impossibility, and my parents supported me going to art school at Parsons. All my brothers and sisters really encouraged me, too. I think they're fascinated that I have a career as an artist. To this day, a lot of my brothers and sisters will give me a headshake like, "Wow, I can't believe that you could do that."

**When did you first think you could actually have a career as a photographer?**

I think I was in my late 20s when I finally realized that [a career in photography] was going to pan out, and that this would be my path in life. After my Whitney show, things were still pretty shaky. Even after I had a few shows under my belt, there was still a lot of uncertainty as to whether the momentum would keep going and whether I could continue to be able to support myself that way.

**How do photographers develop a style? It seems different from the way painters or sculptors develop a style, because the camera is not an extension of your hand. Also, everything happens so fast when you take photos; you can't plan everything out in the moment.**

I think it's just a process of elimination. Everyone kind of starts out shooting black-and-white photos, or shooting their food, or taking photos of their family, or doing a documentary project. You start to do all these things and then you start to check off stuff that you don't like. For me, I realized that [I really liked to take photos of] the people I identified with—artists who were sort of anti-authority and came out of a skateboarding scene. But I also started out doing a documentary project about this basketball player in a wheelchair in Tompkins Square Park. I spent a summer with him, just following him around. I also spent an entire summer photographing doorways in Manhattan. These early projects were great because they taught me so much, but I realized that they didn't say anything about me. I think you really have to find your personality in your photographs. I later recognized that I loved movement, which comes from my skateboarding and snowboarding background. I also loved dancing and I loved going out and partying, so I try to incorporate that feeling—people moving like they're on the dance floor—into my work.

**How did you know that you wanted to be a photographer? Did you feel a specific urge to constantly document what you see? How did you know you didn't want to be a painter, for example?**

I went through everything. My first year at Parsons was painting, my second year was poetry, my third and fourth years were graphic design, and my fifth year was photography. I painted all throughout high school and then I realized I didn't want to do that. I wanted to be outside. I wanted to have a connection to something more spiritual. And then, when I was studying poetry, my parents said that they wouldn't support me being a poet, so I switched to graphic design. I loved graphic design. I loved the balance of it, and I loved playing with type. I'm still such a magazine guy. But [in the end] it came down to photography and typography, and I really just loved photography more. That's when I started taking photos for my assignments,

and I just fell in love with photography and became obsessed with it. I still have that insane, strong, gut obsession.

**You've taken a lot of cross-country trips around America—is there something about America that particularly appeals to you, besides the fact that you're American and you live in this country?**

I guess I feel an allegiance to our country, but there are a lot of photographers I admire who have traveled across the country taking photos, as [Richard] Avedon did for his "In the American West" series, or Robert Frank did for "The Americans." Then there are a lot of movies that have been made [in this tradition], like *Easy Rider*, and there's this movie I really like with James Taylor called *Two-Lane Blacktop*. And then, being a skater, I watched a lot of videos of [professional] skaters going on tour throughout America. I never really got to travel as a kid. Since there were eight of us kids in the family, my parents didn't have the money to really do anything. That's how that project kind of arose, and for ten summers I traveled across America to all the lower 48 states and shot in all of them.

**How did your photos go from looking like the snapshots you took for *The Kids Are Alright* to the more maximalist photos you take now?**

[pause] I think that my early photos contributed to a tradition of photographing downtown New York that had already been in place. From Allen Ginsberg and the beatniks, to the Warhol posse, to David Armstrong or Nan Goldin or Jack Pierson, everyone has photographed their scene in New York, and I was definitely contributing to that lineage for the first five years of my career. When I started traveling across America, my photos changed quite drastically.

**Can you tell me about your experience shooting the "Fall" and "Winter" photos for this show? I assume the "Winter" ones were harder to shoot.**

It was tough. My main objective was just to make sure that the models were warm and that they were safe. We had an ice-fishing tent that we made into a 90-degree sauna, and then we would work it so people would run out into the cold for a one- to three-minute shoot. We'd also hike a lot; sometimes we'd hike two or three miles to some ice fortress. Then there's technical stuff that's kind of boring, like the fact that batteries don't last as long in the cold and people require more food when it's cold out. I had to get my dog one of those doggie parkas and little mountain boots.

**How did you get the photo of the woman with the really red, raw back [*Giant Mountain (Blood)*, 2015]?**

We were shooting and her foot slipped, and I said, "Are you OK?" And she said, "Yeah, it's all right." I said, "OK, we'll look at your back and take you to the car to get bandaged up, but if you don't mind, I'd like to take a shot before." And she got up and she said, "Yeah, I feel good," and then she turned around and the bottom of her back was pretty scratched up and I took that shot.

**It's a great shot. A lot of your cross-country photos have been taken during the summer, but now you're having a fall and a winter series—does this represent an end to something for you?**

Fall and winter were very new [seasons] for me, but no. I'm actually having a spring/summer/fall/winter show in Italy [at Galleria D'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Bergamo] this February.

**What's the next subject you want to explore?**

I think I want to take it back to New York City. It's been awhile.

**It'll be exciting to see what you do with New York this time around. How did you meet all the people in your scene when you first came to New York?**

I had been coming to the city since I was a boy, and I had been coming alone since I was 13. I would hang out with my brother and his boyfriends, and I developed a really strong community early on. My scene was from Canal Street to 14th Street, from Avenue D to the West Side Highway. That's where all the people I was inspired by are from; it's really like a neighborhood. I would walk down the street and see Lou Reed. I just about fainted. That was crazy. New York is also exciting because no one is really from New York; 90 percent of these people are coming here from somewhere else and it kind of gives you permission to reinvent yourself as someone else as well. I feel like everyone does that. That's really so beautiful, especially if you're an artist.

**How do you feel like you reinvented yourself?**

Well, I came out in New York, and that was a big thing for me because it's just so tough in the suburbs.

**Did your family know you were gay?**

Not until I moved to New York, no. I was in a different circumstance because one of my brothers was gay and he was dying of AIDS when I was in high school, so coming out at that time wasn't the best choice for me. But when I came to New York, I got to come out and that made me realize who I wanted to be and how I wanted to live.

**Before you came out, were you pretending that you weren't gay or did you just not address it? Did you have girlfriends?**

No, I had girlfriends. I think I just suppressed it because all the gay men I ever knew—which basically [encompassed] my brother and all of his friends—all died within a period of five years. They had raised me, and it was so traumatic, so I think any homosexual feelings I would have had were just squashed.

**When you think about death and dying, do you feel scared or do you feel like you're trying to fight the inevitable?**

Just being at Dash [Snow]'s show in Connecticut, and going through the photos, thinking, "That person's dead, that person committed suicide, that person's dead, that person committed suicide...." There are a lot of people in my life that are gone and I feel extreme empathy toward them. Death has been a big part of my life for the last 20 years. I'm very aware of how fragile life is.

**It seems like you could have easily had a more negative outlook on things, but your photos are always really hopeful—for example, even just the title *The Kids Are Alright*. Where does this hopefulness come from? Do you think it's just a natural quality that you have?**

No, that optimism is born out of tragedy. I realized that life can be really short, and to see somebody die so tragically and so quickly, it makes you realize, "Damn, I might not have much time here. It's time to do exactly what I want to do, and not dilly-dally." I think I wanted to live really hard. I think coming to New York and partying really hard but also having such a strong work ethic and being so prolific is what I wanted out of that experience.

**Did leaving New York have anything to do with what was happening with Dash?**

No, I left New York before all of that. I just think I needed to get away from everything. I had just spent my first five years in the city out every single night with ten rolls of film in each pocket. I would stuff extra film in my socks, just so I would have it everywhere. Now I really want to do something different because I have a different connection to New York now. I want to come back and photograph the city in a different way.

**Because Dash now has a retrospective up at the Brant Foundation [whose funder, Peter Brant, is a part owner of this publication],**

**I wanted to ask: what were the fundamental differences between you, Dash, and Dan Colen?**

Well, Dash's whole thing was darkness. He was obsessed with war and weapons and there's a lot of darkness and death in his work, whereas I think a lot of my work is about celebrating life. I think that Dan has a real kind of poetic [vision] in his work, and a sense of humor as well.

**You once said that you get obsessed with people, and that you were kind of obsessed with Dash at the beginning. What qualities attract you to certain people?**

They usually have qualities that I don't possess. It's usually someone that's more extreme than I am. I think I'm pretty reserved and [I'm usually attracted to] somebody who is a bit more reckless than me, or someone who has a louder personality than me, or who is maybe more expressive or more opinionated than I am, or who is just really funny, especially if they're really expressive with their body language—that's really important to me. Those are characteristics that I wish I had. In Dash's case, he was such an extreme adventure-seeker. He always wanted to go out on missions, like "Let's go in the subway. Let's go into the tunnels. Let's go on top of the High Line," before the High Line was the High Line. He'd say, "Let's walk the whole thing." He was such an outlaw. He just didn't care. I wish I were the type of person who could talk back to the police. I have friends who will say something and I'm just not that guy. I'm the one who just shuts the fuck up.

**But that makes you the survivor.**

[laughs] Yeah, but I really wish that I could be certain other people.

**What's a memory that stands out to you from those days that people wouldn't know about?**

[long pause] I'm going to think out loud. I've known Dan since I was 15 years old. I met him when I was in high school in New Jersey, and we became best friends right away. We knew each other through skateboarding and we would come into New York City together. I worked at a skateboard/snowboard shop in Hoboken when I was in high school, and Dan would visit me and then we'd go into Manhattan together to go skateboard two or three days a week after school. That's when I met Dash. He was really young when I first met him; I was 18 and he was, I don't know, maybe 15. He was like New York City's most infamous graffiti writer—there's a section of the police department called the vandal squad, which is entirely dedicated to graffiti writers, and he was the king. In graffiti there's this thing called "All Boroughs," and if you're up in all the boroughs the most, that sort of cements your status in the graffiti community. And Dash was just everywhere.

The three of us were like brothers. We really took care of each other. In the beginning, I was the first one among our group to get attention, but I always approached art like it was rap music—you know the way that rappers always [talk about] their crew? It was really nice to be able to pump my crew, and to tell people about my friends who were also making art. When we were out here in 2002, I showed people Dash's Polaroids and that led to Dash and Dan working with a gallerist out here named Javier Perés for a few years. And then, of course, we were crazy pranksters, especially Dash. You could never get drunk around him or go to sleep around him. He would put matches between your toes when you were sleeping or draw all over you in Sharpie.

**You once said you used to take pictures to have a record of where you'd been, since there were times where you went three days without having touch with reality. How did you not go insane? How did you retain your sanity and just not die?**

I don't know. I guess we just managed that with different drugs. There're drugs that get you up and there're drugs that bring you down and there're drugs that bring you back up. You kind of smooth everything over between the drugs with alcohol. [laughs] We definite-

ly pushed it to the limits of partying when we were younger. Some people died because of that, and some people didn't.

**Do you think that you could have easily died or do you feel like you had a sense of control?**

I think that my barometer was finely tuned. I had a bit more of a sense of mortality than certain people in my group. I think that I was always aware of my own mortality, coming from a middle-class background. There was a lot of survival in me, because I could never afford to just let go completely. I never had that luxury. I always felt that that sensibility made me take the job of being an artist more seriously.

**Was it hard to make that switch? How did you make it through the transition from partying a lot to not at all?**

It was very hard. I really thought that a lot of my creativity [was born out of] my experimentation with drugs and the chaos that comes from really hard partying. I really bought into the belief system of rock 'n' roll, and it was scary to think that my art was going to suffer from [quitting]. But then I realized that my art was getting better. I had more clarity and more momentum to do a lot of the things that I wanted to do before but I just couldn't get it together because I was stuck in that chaotic bubble.

**Did you feel like your work required more energy at the beginning, because you had been relying on drugs to get the creative juices flowing?**

The turnaround happened pretty early for me. Leaving New York City to travel around the U.S. and create work was a big catalyst for me. In 2003, shortly after I had my first show at the Whitney Museum, I took my first road trip and I went to live in Vermont for about six months. I shot all these photos in rural Vermont, all around that state, and [that experience] left me feeling more spiritually connected with nature, which is what I've really been interested in all along. All throughout high school I was into Thoreau and Walden and [American] Romanticism, and I feel like all the art I was interested in when I was growing up contained themes of nature or spirituality.

**Have you ever wanted to be a storm chaser and take photos of tornados and things like that?**

[laughs] No, but Twister is one of my favorite movies. One of my favorite roles of Philip Seymour Hoffman's is his character in the film, Dusty. But, no, that would be too dangerous, and I'm not experienced like that. We're trying to make exciting photos, but I'm not trying to chase a tornado. I do love that stuff, though. My Instagram is just made up of people that shoot extreme adventure photos like that. A lot of the reference photos up on my wall are taken in similarly dangerous settings—extreme weather, or war zones—and I want to capture the essence of that, but I don't really want to be in those circumstances. So I use a lot of fans and smoke machines in my work, and I try to have leaves blowing around in the air a lot. I'm always trying to create the illusion of chaos.

**Do you obsessively take photos all the time, or do you only take photos when you have everything planned out?**

I have my fancy cameras—a Canon [EOS 5D], and I have a Nikon. [laughs] When I'm working, I use those SLRs. But in my daily life, I photograph everything with my iPhone. Actually, the thing I've done the most of in the last five years is making videos on my iPhone. I love doing that. A lot of my friends are just tortured by me taking videos of everything and trying to capture every moment, but that's the way I engage with the world. I'm an archivist.

**I read that you never studied lighting or any other technical aspects of photography, and that you just kind of learned to wing it. Is there anything unique that you've learned from experimentation, like a weird trick that people wouldn't know about?**

Since I didn't study photography fully—I just took a few classes at Parsons—I never learned the technical stuff. I just put my camera on automatic, always. If I need to do lighting and stuff, I hire someone who's a professional. When I shot my yearbook series, for example, I hired someone to do the lighting. But when I'm outside, I'm really aware of color and light. You really want to think about your frame like a painting, and as a painter, which colors would you put in different places? A lot of the time I'll just squint my eyes and make everything out of focus, just shapes, and I'll feel the color and the way it balances. That's how I decide if it's going to be a good image. My philosophy is: set to automatic and adjust later.

**Do you ever surprise yourself? Do you ever take a photo and think, "Wow, I'm really good?"**

[laughs] No, definitely not. I'm definitely my own worst critic; I'm very self-deprecating. It would be nice to feel like that one day.

**That means you haven't peaked yet. Your best is still yet to come.**

[laughs] You know, you're right. At least, I think artists have longer careers than rock 'n' rollers do.

**In the period of time after you had your show at the Whitney, but before you joined Team Gallery, how were you making money?**

I would sell photos out of my studio. [laughs] I was operating my own gallery. It wasn't the best idea. My career was very unusual in terms of the way I [achieved success], and I really didn't know how the whole operation works. Also, my mind was fucked from partying so hard and I didn't trust anybody—that's why I didn't have a gallery.

**Do you remember how much your first photo sold for?**

\$150.

**Oh, wow. That person's lucky.**

[laughs] Yeah. That was before I even had my first show at the Whitney. I also traded a photograph to a restaurant that cooked soul food in the Village, and the guy gave me free food for three months. [laughs] I was living large.

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